



Havana harbor, where the battleship *Maine* was blown up twenty-two years earlier, is seen in the background as fourteen-year-old Alfonso Rodriguez (*left*) embarks on journey to the United States for first of thirty-three operations. Plastic surgery now complete, the Reverend Doctor Rodriguez, the first president of the Evangelical Seminary at Matanzas, Cuba, and leading Christian scholar, leaves New York's Idlewild Airport (*right*) to attend international church conference in Germany.

# The Healing of Alfonso

**The story of a Cuban boy who lost his face but found a faith, and became a leading Christian educator**

By ROBERT H. HEINZE

THE two Cuban boys were seven when Alfonso Rodriguez's cousin climbed into the hammock and began to swing. The harder Alfonso pushed the higher his cousin swung. Both knees were stiff and straight when his feet smashed into Alfonso's jaw. The wound itself was minor, but gangrene, which physicians describe as the "massive death of tissue," soon began its work.

Alfonso Rodriguez, first-grade pupil, was not a pretty sight. The Roman Catholic sisters eased him out of school because the other children were upset by the handkerchief he wore around his face, and even more by the knowledge of that which lay behind the handkerchief. Before many

months went by, little Alfonso Rodriguez, citizen of Sancti Spiritus in the very center of Cuba, had no lips, no cheeks, and almost no nose at all.

Senora Rodriguez had a terrible decision to make in 1915, the year her little boy was removed from the school operated by the Catholic Church, to which she was devoutly loyal. There was but one alternative: the new school of the Presbyterians, who had come to Sancti Spiritus and indeed to Cuba only a dozen years before.

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With heavy heart, she took her son across the busy square of her four-century-old city, down a narrow street, to the school of the hated heretics.

Guided by Principal Edith E. Sloan and teacher Lucy H. Hammond, Alfonso Rodriguez learned quickly. After school hours, he played hard—mostly at baseball and basketball. When he was absent from school, it was because the Cuban doctors were cutting away the wasted tissues of his face.

By the time Miss Ida Pyland came to be a teacher at Sancti Spiritus, young Rodriguez was making large strides mentally, but physically he was losing so much ground that he could hardly be understood when he spoke. In order to pronounce words, he would stuff cotton into his mouth and bandages between his teeth. The cotton also helped him to stem the unhindered flow of saliva.

Finally, normal eating became impossible. The spout of a teapot had to be put in his mouth so that liquid nourishment could be poured in. Each mealtime the boy would force a toothpick between his teeth, then a matchstick, and then successively larger pieces of wood, until there was an opening large enough for the spout of the teapot.

Ida Pyland looked at Alfonso and said to Miss Sloan and Miss Hammond, "Dr. Johnson can do it." She meant that surgeon Joseph E. Johnson, a Memphis Baptist, had the skill to restore the boy's face. With Dr. Edward E. Odell, secretary of Presbyterian national missions work in the West Indies, they interested the right people in "the Cuban boy without a face."

Chief among the right people was the Reverend Dr. William H. Hudnut, Sr., then pastor of a church in Youngstown.

Ohio. Who it was that knew Dr. Hudnut, and how it was that Dr. Hudnut was called upon to help, are lost to the record. This story of healing has been entrusted chiefly to the memory of one who had every reason to be a shy little boy, and who knows how to be grateful to a man who seemed to come from nowhere to help.

Hudnut, who has two sons in the Presbyterian ministry now, went among his own and other church people, promoting the cause of Alfonso Rodriguez. He had a postcard printed, showing a picture of the boy and bearing the caption: "Help give back the lips of a Cuban boy." It told where to send the money and how much would be needed.

Every summer between 1920 and 1929, the young Cuban was sent to the United States for surgery—thirty-three operations in all. The first time, he came in the company of the Reverend Eduardo Galvez, a commissioner to the General Assembly which was meeting that May in Philadelphia. The day their ship docked at New Orleans was a local holiday, with a celebration scheduled to last an entire weekend. Government offices were closed. The immigration and health authorities looked behind Alfonso's handkerchief and what they saw convinced them that here was a loathsome and communicable disease. For want of a better place of isolation, they lodged the minister and the boy in the local jail until higher authorities could be consulted after the holiday. This may well be the only time in history that a commissioner to the Presbyterian-General Assembly was ever detained in jail.

Ida Pyland had plenty of faith in Dr. Johnson. Dr. Johnson had even greater faith in God. He was one of those uncom-

monly good surgeons who prayed with his patients. He came to Alfonso's room and drew him detailed pictures of the coming operations. When the boy understood the surgery, doctor and boy got on their knees by the hospital bed to pray.

Before one operation, the boy could see from the doctor's drawings that this time he might just possibly have lips. The work would not by any means be complete, but real lips could be hoped for. When the anesthesia wore off he awoke to slide his tongue between his teeth. That exploring member discovered a dream come true, a prayer answered. His lips were there.

The nurses found him on all fours among the coverings of the bed. Thinking him delirious, they tried to force him back between the sheets. Just then Dr. Johnson came and said, "He's not delirious; he's praying." And Alfonso added, "I'm thanking God for my lips."

One may well imagine that this miracle was not wrought without pain. The flesh with which to rebuild Alfonso's face was cut from his thigh. For more than a year he could not walk, and had to progress slowly from bed to wheelchair, from wheelchair to crutches, and from crutches to cane.

While the Presbyterian missionary teachers were nurturing the boy's mind and making sacrificial efforts to have his face restored, he was undergoing important spiritual changes. In the school at Sancti Spiritus, the Bible was opened to him. He memorized the Twenty-third Psalm. He learned to sing the familiar hymns of Protestantism. A favorite hymn of the Cuban church was and still is, "Onward, Christian Soldiers." This has been so, because the militant music of that song always appeals to the young



Sancti Spiritus Church and school both welcomed the "Cuban boy without a face." Protestants first came to Cuba in 1902.



Mathilda Lutzen Rodriguez stays home with children Ana Mathilda and Alfonso Leslie, while her husband attends a world conference in Europe. At home the family speaks the native English of Iowa-born "Tillie," but uses Spanish in Cuba.

churches. The Protestants were nonexistent in Cuba until the power of Spain, and hence that of the Roman Church, was broken at the end of the Spanish-American War. The Cuban Presbyterians have all of the militant fervor and the evangelical zeal of a first-generation church.

Schooled in this supercharged atmosphere, Alfonso Rodriguez decided he wanted to become a Presbyterian. He made that decision in 1920, the same year he was to be sent to America for his first operation. With considerable hesitation he told his mother what he was about to do. She reasoned with him, pleaded with him, and finally threatened him. She said, "If you join the heretic church, your suitcase will be packed and ready for you when you come home. If you desert our faith, you must find a new home."

He'd made a man's decision, but Alfonso Rodriguez was only a boy, a frightened little boy, when he came home from the Presbyterian church that night. He looked behind the front door, and no suitcase was there. His mother seemed to be in bed. He went to his own room. The covers of his bed were turned down as always. His mother was still his mother. Mother and son didn't talk about that terrible night of tension until three years later, when Senora Rodriguez joined the Presbyterian Church at an evangelistic meeting. Then she told him, "The question I answered tonight I began to ask myself three years ago. I wanted to know what it is that means so much that a little boy will give up his home."

Summers were devoted to operations. The winter, never very cold in Cuba, was a time for study. Study he did until it became apparent that Alfonso Rodriguez was destined to be a teacher. By the time he

was a senior in high school, the Sancti Spiritus school needed a fifth-grade teacher and it seemed to all concerned that young Rodriguez could handle the job. As a high-school student, he was required to wear short trousers. As a fifth-grade teacher, he was expected to wear long trousers. In that year of combined teaching and learning, he probably changed his clothes oftener than any man on the whole island of Cuba.

It was the misfortune of one of Alfonso's younger brothers, older brothers being what they are, to be in the fifth grade that same year. It was his further misfortune to learn that elder brother Alfonso would have a full-time job as sixth-grade teacher the following year. As a matter of fact, the pattern of need for teachers so shifted in the next half-dozen years that Alfonso Rodriguez taught each grade of school, in its successive turn, from fifth to last year of high school. Though the younger brother harbored a spirit of resentment at this unjust arrangement, he finished his education and is now a physician specializing in pediatrics.

Alfonso's influence upon all his brothers must have extended beyond the classroom. Every one of them—the pediatrician, a bookkeeper, a telegraph inspector, a civil servant, a lawyer—has come into the Presbyterian Church. Talking about the conversion of his entire family, Alfonso says, "The trouble in my face has been the greatest blessing in my life."

Another teacher who came to Sancti Spiritus was a pretty Iowa girl named Mathilda Lutzen. Cubans were as quick as Iowans to shorten *Mathilda* to *Tillie*. Alfonso and Tillie were married in 1933 and went off to the Cuban city of Caibarien, where he was to be principal of

the Presbyterian school. *Principal* was a rather fancy title for a man in charge of a school in which his wife was one of the two teachers. Edward Odell says that the four years they spent there demonstrated Rodriguez's talent as an educational administrator. In 1933 there were twenty-six students and two teachers. By 1947 there were 360 students and fourteen teachers. It is rumored that Presbyterian financial resources were too limited in those days to permit the Caibarien school to keep on growing at this dramatic rate. Alfonso was transferred to the famous school known as La Progresiva, at Cardenas, the pride and joy of everybody who believes in national missions.

Cardenas is not far from the capital city, Havana. While teaching at La Progresiva, Alfonso finished his work toward the Master of Education and Doctor of Philosophy degrees at the University of Havana. Clearly, he was destined to be a teacher—a good teacher, a Christian teacher—all his life. This destiny, however, became much less clear when the Board of National Missions sent Alfonso and Tillie to minister to the Tucson Indians in Arizona while he did a year of further graduate work at the University of Tucson. In the Southwest, where the culture of the Indians mingles with that of the Latin Americans, the product of the mission school became a missionary. In the year 1943, at the age of thirty-six, Alfonso Rodriguez decided to enter the ministry. He'd been speaking and preaching in Cuban churches for more than a dozen years, but his call had been to teach. With enough college and graduate work already done to suffice two men, he launched a new career as a student at Princeton Theological Seminary.



Layman Walter McDougall (left) donated the Martha McDougall Memorial Library, thus advancing theological education in the West Indies and providing a memorial to his wife.



National Missions personnel secretary Lawrence W. Lange (left) and Michigan synod executive Kenneth G. Neigh see Rodriguez in New York and show him pictures taken in Cuba.

The English language was no difficulty for a Spanish-speaking Cuban who had courted and won an American wife. In fact, their two children, Ana Mathilda, fifteen, and Alfonso Leslie, eight, are equally at home in Spanish or English. When the Rodriguez family is in Cuba, they work, play, shop, and go to school with the Spanish tongue. But in their home they speak English so that there will be plenty of practice in both languages. When in the United States they reverse the rule: Spanish at home and English elsewhere. A recent visitor to Cuba, unable to understand nine out of ten conversations and beginning to feel the strain of belonging to an alien minority, was refreshed to hear eight-year-old Leslie implore his father with "Daddy, come on, Daddy, give me a nickel."

Edward A. Odell, now retired as West Indies secretary of the National Missions Board, has written a book called *It Came to Pass*. It is his chronicle of the fifty years in which Protestantism has been at work in the islands off the American coast. He says in his book that the life of Alfonso Rodriguez "reveals clearly God's purpose in this phase of the growth of the Church." Odell sees God's purpose in the restoration of "the Cuban boy without a face." He sees it in Rodriguez's training to teach which was followed by his call to the ministry. He sees God's purpose also in the founding of the Evangelical Seminary at Matanzas when Alfonso was in Princeton.

The Methodists and the Presbyterians, and a little later the Episcopalians, determined early in the forties that there should be a seminary for Protestants in Cuba. They chose a site in Matanzas, a seacoast town a few miles from Havana. The seminary was established on a hill above the Bay of Matanzas.

The new seminary was to save the expense and difficulty of sending young men and women to Puerto Rico or the States for training. It was to be the final stone in the building of a Christian Church for Cuba, led by Cubans, ministered to by Cubans, and governed by Cubans. A president was needed badly.

The president upon whom all denominations could agree was Alfonso Rodriguez, then a student with two more years to go at Princeton. Denominational differences are as discernible in Cuba as anywhere else in Christendom. The Episcopalians, who usually do things very well and therefore like to do them themselves, had to do some soul searching before joining the seminary enterprise. Differences in observing the Lord's Supper were distinct enough that it was agreed that the Sacrament would not be observed on the campus. Nevertheless, all could agree that the not-yet-trained, not-yet-ordained Alfonso Rodriguez should be president.

A vice-president acted for Alfonso until he could finish seminary in 1948. He spent four years, not the normal three, at Princeton, because he wanted the Doctor of Theology degree in addition to the usual diploma.

Matanzas has graduated twenty students thus far. Ten of them have been Presbyterians. Many of the students are women, some of them wives of the ministerial candidates, and some of them preparing to be directors of religious education. Like every educational executive, Alfonso Rodriguez has buildings he exhibits with pride and others which still are dreams and scale models. The next project is an apartment dormitory for married couples. Visitors who breathe the fresh air of Matanzas, experience the enthusiasm of Alfonso Rodriguez, and worship with Christians who act as if the New Testament had just been written, get the feeling that the seminary will get its dormitory and anything else it needs.

Last winter about thirty Americans toured Cuba, visiting the scores of churches, schools, and mission stations which are the Presbytery of Cuba. At the end of their journey they came to Matanzas, where the Martha McDougall Memorial Library was to be dedicated. For the benefit of Walter McDougall, donor of the building, and the visitors from the United States, Dr. Rodriguez could readily have made his speech in

English. But most of the people who gathered that day were Cubans. Alfonso Rodriguez, standing by a dedicatory brass plaque, talked in Spanish. His gestures were those of his countrymen, arms stretched to full length and hands flailing. His lips moved little, and moved strangely when they did, for he has learned to speak all over again with his God-given but man-made lips.

His eyes were black and piercing. His face was good to look at—not flesh remade by surgeons, but human personality transformed by divine power. One man who hadn't even the benefit of high-school Spanish reported the impact of Alfonso Rodriguez by saying, "It was like Pentecost must have been. I didn't know the words, but everything he said was full of meaning for me."

Edward A. Odell risked nothing at all when he ventured to say that God's purpose was revealed in the life of Alfonso Rodriguez. This is a man whose face was rebuilt out of the flesh of his thigh. This is a man whose superior mind might have remained undeveloped because people were repelled by a little boy wearing a handkerchief to hide his face. This is a teacher who stopped teaching history and civics so he could begin to teach men to preach the Gospel. This is a man who tells his own story simply, in one sentence: "God gave me back my lips and I must use my lips to speak for him."

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